

# constant permeike

**HANNIBAL**



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*Back from the Field (Tired Farmer and Farmer's Wife)*, 1931  
54 x 43 cm

Ink on paper  
Permeke Museum Jabbeke | Mu.ZEE Ostend

# Foreword

Dominique Savelkoul, Joost Declercq

The painter, sculptor and draughtsman Constant Permeke has often been approached from a rather one-sided perspective in recent decades, largely due to the cultural climate that was prevalent at that time. A gap exists between our perception of Permeke and the daily reality of his artistic practice. After all, Permeke was a progressive artist who was fully aligned with international modernism and motivated by a deep humanism. Which is why he has lost none of his contemporary relevance. Our aim is to highlight his international significance, his versatility and willingness to experiment. Constant Permeke was an immensely successful artist during his lifetime, with an illustrious national and international reputation.

A monographic museum requires a different museological approach. The focus shifts to an artist-centred outlook and a commitment to research. The fruits of this work will be concentrated into a knowledge centre, through which the museum will encourage and support academic research.

The garden has also received an overhaul. In keeping with Permeke's pioneering and innovative spirit, it has become a radically ecological site with scope for biodiversity and endless experimentation. Together with Plant en Houtgoed, who create sustainable green spaces, and in close consultation with Regionaal Landschap Houtland en Polders, we have restored the original elements using archival photos by Permeke. The garden is a reflection on the future, with the same experimental and progressive vision that Permeke himself embodies. The tightly clipped lawns have been replaced by flower meadows, fruit and nut trees, and participatory projects with schools and local residents are a given. The garden is a place where people can relax, admire the biodiverse surroundings, meet one another and enjoy a picnic.

The renovation was undertaken by the Flemish Government, the owner of the building. Particular attention was paid to Permeke's sculpture studio. The museum was fully insulated and equipped with a climate-control system that meets international museum standards. A new security system has been installed and accessibility is vastly improved.

The reopening was facilitated by the generous support of several public institutions and private collectors. For example, the Permeke Museum received a substantial grant from Tourism Flanders as part of the Flemish Masters relaunch project to promote new interpretations and audience-friendly initiatives.

We are immensely grateful to all our external partners for their much-valued support, as well as to the Permeke Museum team who have once again made this house a true gem.

# Constant Permeke: Beyond Expressionism

## Inne Gheeraert

Tender motherhood, domestic scenes, people engaged in everyday activities: they are all undisguised, animated portraits in which the poses say more than the facial expressions. The landscapes and seascapes also exude a hushed, sometimes sublime warmth. Art and life were closely entwined for Constant Permeke. His restless quest for balance is reflected in his oeuvre. Raw and soft, tempestuous and hushed. His figures and landscapes pulse with life-affirming energy, but also exude an air of melancholy and submission.

Constant Permeke created original series of works around recurrent and alternating themes. He combined the technique of painting – including powerful brushstrokes, dabs, smudges, scratches, stains and drips – with drawing and outlining. His primary materials were charcoal, pencil, pastel, turpentine and oil paint, which he applied to canvas, paper and/or plywood, one material glued (partly) over the other. For Permeke, it was all about play and the creative process, seeking and experimenting, and an endless deliberation over whether to continue or abandon his investigations. He took risks and pushed boundaries when selecting the techniques, materials and formats that he would assemble into collages. Averse to taboos and restrictions, and fully aligned with Modernism, Constant Permeke wanted to break through academism and reinvent painting, time and time again.

Permeke's art was not an exercise in social realism. He painted and sketched people as he saw them in daily life. It was a way of capturing the intangible and celebrating life, one work at a time. Other pieces are pure experiments in terms of formal language and, in these instances, the subject is secondary to the visual composition.

Although his work is often classified as Expressionism, Permeke actually explored a wide range of registers. 'Flemish Expressionism' was a term employed by the Brussels gallery Sélection during the 1920s. It was an era in which art history was clearly divided into styles and movements. Hard-to-categorise works were often overlooked on the grounds that they were difficult to understand. The term, which also had its commercial uses, certainly put the artists Gust De Smet, Frits Van den Berghe and Constant Permeke on the international map. It amply fulfilled its purpose. Permeke rose to international prominence in the 1920s. He participated in many important exhibitions, both national and international, alongside illustrious figures such as Georges Braque, Amedeo Modigliani, Ossip Zadkine and Pablo Picasso, to name just a few. His fame stretched from France and the Netherlands to Switzerland and Sweden and all the way to Brazil. In the 1950s, for example, he twice participated in the São Paulo Biennial, and his work was acquired for the collection of the Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo (MAM-SP). He was hailed in the international press as 'the most prominent figure of his generation', 'perhaps the greatest painter in Europe', and also 'the deepest, the most human'.

The architecture of Constant Permeke's home, which today houses the Permeke Museum, is yet another reflection of his progressive character. As part of his quest for silence and seclusion, he purchased a piece of land in Jabbeke in 1928, surrounded by polders, fields and meadows. Several sources mention Permeke's personal vision for the house. He asked an architect friend, Pierre Vandervoort from Nieuwpoort, to execute his sketches.

Built in a functional and Modernist style, the home was not only innovative but also an imposing presence in the expansive polder landscape that was dotted with traditional farms. Permeke constructed his house in the same year that a number of leading avant-garde architects designed important residential properties, most notably Henry Van de Velde, Gerrit Rietveld and Huib Hoste. The Dutch De Stijl movement and the German Bauhaus also reached their pinnacle during this period.

When Constant Permeke died in 1952, his children opened the estate to the public. It was his express wish that the house would become a museum. The Province of West Flanders purchased the property and the collection several years later. In 2018, the competency for cultural affairs was transferred from the Provinces to the Flemish Government. The building was in dire need of refurbishment.

We are delighted that the Permeke Museum has reopened. Two exhibitions will now be organised per year. International artists will be invited to show their work in the sculpture studio and garden during the summer, where it will resonate with Permeke's oeuvre. We will be seeking affinities and contrasts as a way of demonstrating and highlighting the diversity and depth of Permeke's art. His work will be viewed from a fresh perspective on each occasion. The winter exhibitions will be devoted solely to Constant Permeke and will not just focus on his oeuvre – the artist's ideas, practice and legacy will also be considered. A theme from the oeuvre, a specific technique or an aspect of the archive will be highlighted using works from the collection, supplemented by external loans from museums and private collections, for example. The winter presentation will adopt a more scientific approach in order to deepen our understanding of the artist. Exceptional artworks from the museum's collection will be exhibited in the main house as examples of the principal themes in the oeuvre. Coincidentally, the collection contains over 150 works by Constant Permeke, including some eighty paintings, almost his entire sculptural oeuvre and numerous life-size charcoal drawings.

The Permeke Museum will henceforth profile itself as a knowledge centre. It will be a central reference point for information and scholarship on the artist's life and work and be a place where the archives can be consulted. The scientific research that is conducted will eventually lead, amongst other things, to the publication of a catalogue raisonné.

Museum visitors are invited to approach Permeke's art from new viewpoints and discover the latest insights into his work. The aim is to rekindle the debate on Constant Permeke's art after years of relative stagnation. We hope that this publication, alongside the permanent and temporary exhibitions, will contribute to the discussion. This book highlights Permeke's art from several critical angles.



# Permeke in England, the Crucial Years

Jan Ceuleers

In early October 1914, Constant Permeke sustained serious injury during the fighting at Duffel. He was evacuated via Antwerp and Ostend to England, and was later reunited with his wife and mother in Folkestone. After a spell in a London hospital, he moved with his family to the countryside in March 1915: first to Stanton St Bernard in Wiltshire, then in March 1916 to Chardstock in East Devon, and then in 1917 to the south west, closer to the sea, to Sidmouth and Sidford. During the war, he became a father three times: to his daughter Beatty and his two sons Johnnie and Paul. He returned to Belgium with his family in April 1919 and once again settled in Ostend.

Aside from a few sporadic contacts with other Belgian artists in exile in Britain, Constant Permeke led an isolated life. His correspondence with the exiles in the Netherlands was confined to a small number of letters. He took part in several group exhibitions, and in late 1918 sold two paintings to the Dutch businessman Jacob de Graaff, who lived in London and also owned works by other Belgian artists. Permeke got to know him through Hippolyte Daeye.

Permeke said little about his time in England. In a letter to the painter Isidoor Opsomer<sup>1</sup> in the early 1930s, concerning attempts to support the artists during the crisis years, he looks back on this other difficult period: "Do you see anyone discussing Permeke there? At that time, I painted *The Stranger*, *The Cider Drinker*, and numerous works on cardboard, and all my work from England was effectively hidden behind them. I did not exist. Permeke was obliged to do everything alone, and that is what he did. There I was, out in the world with my elderly mother, wife and three children to support. But all I got was an invalidity allowance of 2 shillings 6d a day until they wanted to take off my leg. This was how my art was refined. When I came home, I found there was nothing left; and it cost me blood, sweat and tears to get where I am today. But that is the foundation upon which my life rests. Whether you like it or not – it is there. Nothing can change that."<sup>2</sup>

A letter to Arthur Cornette<sup>3</sup> from the same period in response to his essay about Permeke takes a different tone: "I read – and with so much pleasure I recalled – in my memory at least, my happy period as a painter! In England, when I was hobbling around on crutches and my wife was carrying the bucket of water around my temperas, including yours – painted by the dozen – and in the Langestraat after the war, and all those hoary old fishermen, that time when we had not yet come up against life's seriousness and the children were still small – carefree."<sup>4</sup>

Most commentators regard his English years as an ante-room before Permeke started on the real work. The fact that he increasingly produced atypical paintings in England is seen as a mystery, a sign of serious doubt, or is ascribed to a slew of influences. These range from Cubo-Expressionism, which is said to have reached him by letter from the Netherlands, up to and including the ghosts of Pieter Bruegel, Rembrandt, William Turner, Vincent van Gogh and James Ensor, who were believed to have taken hold of him. The absence of documentation means that these speculations cannot be verified.



*The Butcher*, 1916  
116 × 147 cm

Oil on canvas  
Museum of Ixelles Collection, Brussels

# Galleries, Journals and Permeke's International Reputation in the 1920s

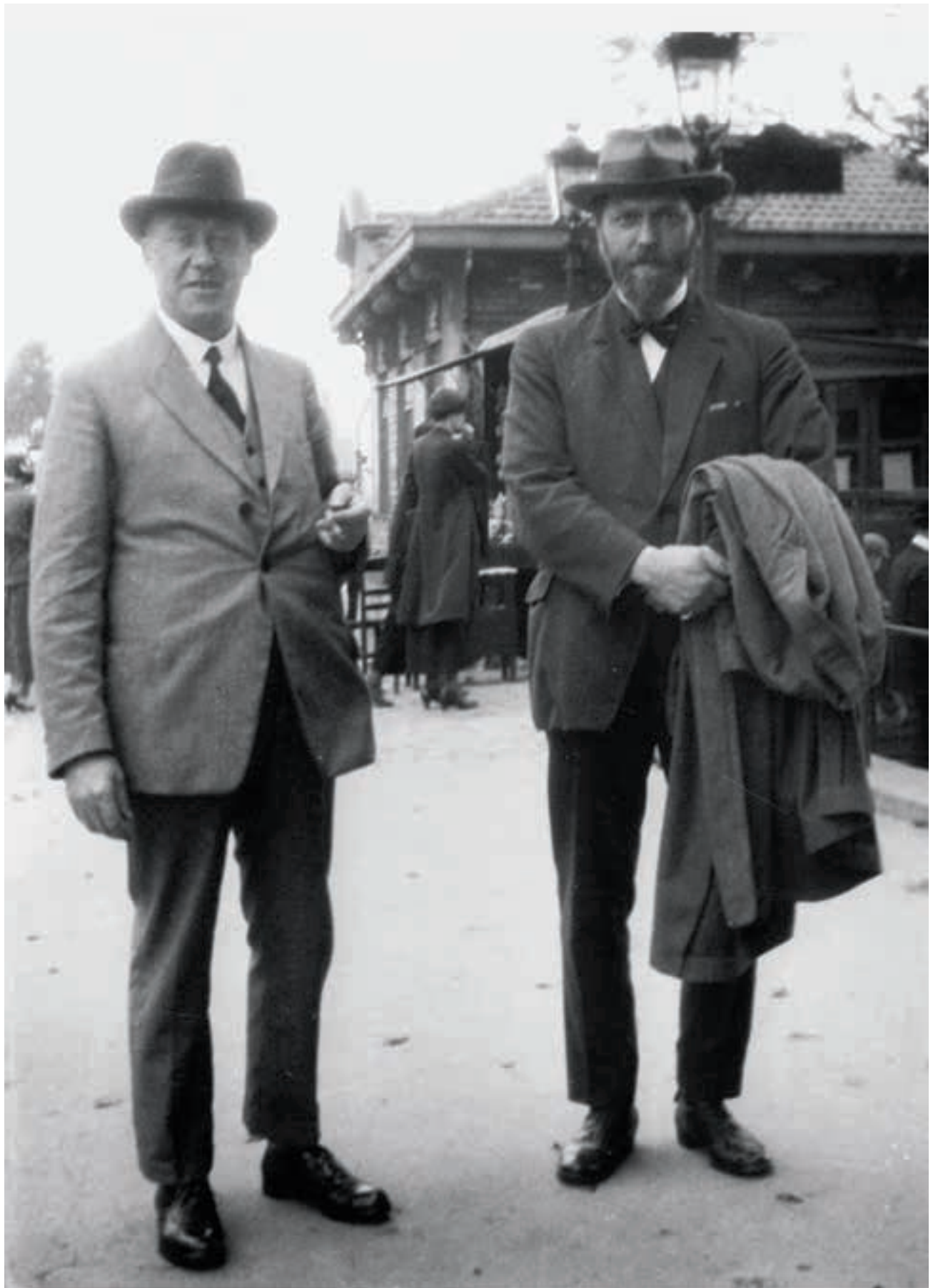
Inne Gheeraert

Constant Permeke was a young boy when Modernism emerged at the turn of the 20th century. When he first encountered Vincent van Gogh's work in a group exhibition in Ostend in 1907,<sup>1</sup> Pablo Picasso was putting the finishing touches to his legendary painting *Les Femmes d'Alger*. The Cubists exhibited their revolutionary work at the Autumn Salon in Paris just two years later. The Modernist avant-garde movement was gaining momentum. New York hosted its first Modernist exhibition, while Marcel Duchamp introduced the 'readymade' with his *Bicycle Wheel*; and French Cubism was the talking point at the eighth Salon des Indépendants in Brussels in 1911.<sup>2</sup> Permeke was familiar with the new international movements, such as Fauvism, Expressionism, Cubism and Futurism, and not just through journals, but also via the numerous exhibitions that were then being organised in Brussels and Antwerp.<sup>3</sup>

Nineteenth-century artists had been reliant upon grand group exhibitions or salons to exhibit or sell their work. While the Paris salons were especially famous, comparable events were also held in many other cities and countries. Belgium hosted exhibitions in Brussels, Antwerp and Ghent, for example. But by the dawn of the twentieth century such forums fell short of the artistic and commercial expectations of the avant-garde artists. Private galleries specialising in contemporary art began to open their doors. They provided artists with (inter)national exposure and financial and ideological support. The galleries also stimulated the international dissemination of avant-garde works, opposed the conservative policies of the official museums, and encouraged diverse forms of experimentation and innovation.<sup>4</sup> Yet the Belgian art market was small and inflexible due to the limited number of art lovers and collectors. It made commercial sense, therefore, for Belgian artists to explore opportunities in France. The country was a desirable destination for many Belgian gallery owners, who often maintained Parisian outposts.<sup>5</sup>

Galerie Georges Giroux, also known as GGG, opened in Brussels in 1912, the year in which Constant Permeke, then twenty-six, returned to Ostend from Sint-Martens-Latem. The inaugural presentation was an impressive touring exhibition of Italian Futurism, curated by Galerie Bernheim-Jeune in Paris. It was here that Permeke first encountered this new Italian art movement. That same year, together with Léon Spilliaert, he participated in Giroux' group exhibition for emerging artists, *Les bleus de la GGG*.<sup>6</sup> The Brussels gallery also presented a German Expressionism exhibition in 1913 and one on French Cubism the following year, the latter of which included work by Alexander Archipenko, Marc Chagall, Giorgio de Chirico, Louis Marcoussis, Jean Metzinger and Francis Picabia, amongst others. Galerie Georges Giroux thus became a vital link in the national and international promotion of Modernism. Constant Permeke was involved with the gallery from the outset, participating in regular exhibitions and





Constant Permeke with the collector Fabrice Polderman in Paris on the occasion of his exhibition at Galerie La Licorne, 1921

# Constant Permeke in Brazil

## Felipe Martinez Sevilhano

Constant Permeke's reception in Brazil cannot be discussed without reference to his involvement in the São Paulo Biennials of 1951 and 1955. Seven of his artworks were exhibited at the inaugural edition of the exhibition, including *About Permeke*. Another painting, *The Harvest*, won an acquisition prize, financed by the Banco Nacional Imobiliário Acquisition Fund. Paintings granted acquisition prizes were incorporated into the collection of the recently created Museum of Modern Art of São Paulo (MAM-SP). Established in 1948, just a few years prior to the first Biennial, its aim was to assemble a comprehensive collection of modern art, broadly along the lines of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The museum's artistic director, Lourival Gomes Machado, who also organised the first Biennial, wrote in the catalogue introduction<sup>1</sup> that this new exhibition was designed "to put Brazilian modern art in live contact with the art of the rest of the world, at the same time that São Paulo would seek to become a world artistic centre". It is worth noting that Nelson Rockefeller donated the first artworks to the museum's collection in the context of cultural diplomacy during the Cold War years.

In this first edition of the São Paulo Biennial, Permeke was presented to the Brazilian public as the most prominent living Belgian artist and the central figure of Flemish Expressionism. His work was displayed alongside pieces by other influential Belgian artists, such as Gaston Bertrand, Jean-Baptiste Brusselmans, Willem Paerels, Paul Delvaux and René Magritte. Out of all these illustrious names, Permeke was identified as being the leading representative of Belgian art and he was awarded the acquisition prize. Permeke's centrality in Belgian art at the first Biennial can partly be explained by the fact that only living artists were exhibited in the show. According to the text introducing the Belgian delegation, names such as the recently deceased James Ensor were displayed in tribute exhibitions held in the United States. Permeke, born in 1886, was sixty-five years old at the time, but he was not the most senior of the Belgians shown at the Biennial. Willem Paerels and Jean-Baptiste Brusselmans were born in 1878 and 1884 respectively. Even Magritte, born in 1898 and internationally famous, was practically the same age as Permeke.

In addition to *The Harvest*, another painting by Permeke was acquired during the first Biennial. This was *Seascape*, which Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho purchased for his private collection. He subsequently donated it, along with other artworks, to the University of São Paulo. The introductory text to the delegation describes Permeke as "an audacious and sensitive artist, last survivor of the School of Sint-Martens-Latem and founder of Flemish Expressionism". It also states that "only a few Belgian artists escaped Permeke's influences". The author was the Advisor for Artistic Propaganda at the Ministry of Public Education in Brussels, Émile Langui.

It is worth mentioning that Brazil was undergoing radical changes in the 1950s. The economy was developing, and the country was thriving in a world devastated by the war. It was finally bearing the fruits of the industrialisation that had started in the 1930s with the new republic. Building museums and cultural institutions in this modernising country was a natural consequence of the developmental spirit of those years. The creation of the Museum of Art of São Paulo (MASP) in 1947, and MAM-SP



*Marine*, 1933  
75 × 110 cm

*Rural Landscape*, 1947  
77 × 100 cm



Oil on canvas  
Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo (MAC/USP)

Oil on canvas  
Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo (MAC/USP)



# Permeke's Modernist Artist's Residence

Anneleen Cassiman

In preparation for the planned renovation works in the Permeke Museum, research was conducted into the history of the building and a stratigraphic colour study was commissioned.<sup>1</sup> This article will discuss the results of this architectural-historical investigation. Constant Permeke's artist's residence was built in 1929, based on plans by architect Pierre Vandervoort. The house is constructed in a Modernist brick architectural style that is characteristic of the 1930s. It has been a museum since 1960.

## **The Permeke family in Jabbeke**

Constant Permeke was born in Antwerp on 31 July 1886, the child of landscape painter Henri-Louis Permeke and Stephanie Buytaert. After living in Burcht near Antwerp for a time, the family moved to Ostend in 1892. Permeke married Marie Delaere in 1912 and the couple briefly settled in Bruges. The artist and his family spent the war years in England. After the conflict, they returned to Ostend and lived in the Vuurtorenwijk near the port.

After having lived in Ostend for around ten years, Constant Permeke moved with his family to rural Jabbeke. His friend Armand Delwaide from Bruges encouraged him to explore the hinterland of the coastal region. From 1927, Permeke spent the summer months in a house at what was then Hoogstraat 59 (now Dorpstraat 51) in Jabbeke.<sup>2</sup> In 1928, Permeke and his wife purchased two plots of arable land from a farmer named Lodewijk Demaré.<sup>3</sup> These plots were chosen for their rural character and peaceful natural setting. Country life was a source of inspiration for his work during this period.

## **Architect Pierre Vandervoort's plans from 1929 and the influence of Constant Permeke**

A number of publications suggest that the artist's residence was built according to Permeke's own ideas: "He draws in the soil with a stick and roughly sketches out the contours of his future home".<sup>4</sup> He was so closely involved in the building project that he produced few artworks during this period: "Completely preoccupied with the construction of his home in Jabbeke, Permeke produced comparatively little in 1929 and during the spring of 1930".<sup>5</sup> The building plans and technical realisation of the house were executed by his friend, the architect Pierre Vandervoort.<sup>6</sup> Yet the extent to which Permeke influenced the design of the house remains unclear. In all likelihood, it is an architectural translation of Permeke's concept, arrived at through a collaboration between client and architect.

Architect Pierre Vandervoort, who was born in 1891 in Schaarbeek and died in 1946 in Marcinelle, was primarily active during the inter-war years. Directly after the First World War, he was appointed municipal architect in his home town of Nieuwpoort-Bad (Koksijde).<sup>7</sup> In 1923–1924, he designed a memorial for Oostduinkerke's military and civilian war victims, in collaboration with sculptor Oscar Jespers (1887–1970). The original plans for the park around the memorial were also designed by Vandervoort. He was additionally involved in the post-war reconstruction of Nieuwpoort-Stad. In 1921, he designed a shop in the Neo-Classical style in the Marktstraat, and a neo-Flemish, Renaissance-style house with an adjacent hostelry in the Recollettenstraat. In 1923, he built the Neo-Romanesque Saint Bernard parish church in Nieuwpoort, a replacement for the 1877 original that had been lost in the First World War. The arched area in the west gable was decorated with symbols of the Four Evangelists, created by Oscar Jespers.





# Permeke as Sculptor<sup>1</sup>

Inneke Schwickert, Wendy Van Hoorde

*“I struggle now with the clay drying and crumbling, with the plaster breaking and spoiling, with the terracotta shrinking and the wood splitting.”*

— Constant Permeke, 1939

When Constant Permeke began experimenting with sculpture at the age of forty-nine, he had very little technical knowledge of the medium. At this point in his career, he was a prolific and successful painter and draughtsman with a secure national and international reputation. It was also the period in which Permeke typically drew inspiration from his everyday surroundings, painting themes such as seascapes and landscapes, anonymous fishermen and women, peasants and farmers' wives. After his 1936 exhibition at Bozar – Centre for Fine Arts, however, the artist was criticised in the press for having allowed his work to stagnate and for reverting to overly classical compositions. In response to the growing backlash of the mid-1930s, Permeke made a firm decision to try a new means of expression.<sup>2</sup> It was not unusual for an artist to switch disciplines in this era. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for example, both Rik Wouters (1882–1916) and Constantin Meunier (1831–1905) had transitioned from painting to sculpture. Nevertheless, critics feared that Permeke's quest for a new expressive means would negatively impact his paintings. It was suggested that he apprentice himself to a craftsman to learn the ropes. Yet when Permeke's first exhibition to include sculptures opened at the Brussels Centre for Fine Arts in 1939, everyone was astounded by the quality of his work: “The surprise is in the unity of a fundamental originality for which all means are equal and which, suddenly changing profession, retains all its magnificent virtues – and, if you like, its faults. Permeke does not deny himself and remains faithful to himself.”<sup>3</sup>

Permeke used his personal exhibition space, which he had constructed next to his home in Jabbeke in 1934, as a sculpture studio from 1937 onwards. This enabled him to experiment with an array of formats from the very outset. He wanted to create sculptures that “would transcend the roof and could reach for the sky”.<sup>4</sup> Permeke's son, Paul, believed that his father turned to sculpture as part of his quest for monumentality.<sup>5</sup> Permeke's focus within the new medium was the female nude, a relatively recent theme that he also elaborated in monumental drawings. His creative process was documented by his son-in-law Pierre Devos (1917–1972), a sculptor who also began assisting him in the studio in 1944. Permeke sometimes used drawings as preliminary studies, which he may or may not have originally conceived with sculptural works in mind. He drew several smaller designs like this during the Second World War. In addition, he occasionally made small models that he immediately transformed into full-size figures.<sup>6</sup> While we know that the artist followed these three steps while making, for example, *The Three Graces* (1949) and *The Sower* (1939), it is impossible to trace the design process behind every figure.

Permeke was occasionally and unsurprisingly compared to the French sculptors Ossip Zadkine (1888–1967) and Aristide Maillol (1861–1944). Both enjoyed exemplary reputations in 1930s Belgium. Maillol represented a harmonious formal language peculiar to the classical tradition, while Zadkine was associated with the avant-garde and expressivity. Maillol's oeuvre reflected a continuous search for a timeless idiom, a repetition of

## Quest for monumentality



Installation view of the exhibition *Constant Permeke – Sculptures. Dessins*, Centre for Fine Arts, Brussels, 1939



Permeke in his living room beside *Head of the Farmer Serfien*, 1932

# ARTWORKS





*The Rooftops of Bruges*, 1907  
76 × 63 cm

Oil on panel  
Permeke Museum Jabbeke | Mu.ZEE Ostend





*Snowy Landscape in the Ardennes*, 1909  
50 × 40 cm

Oil on canvas  
Permeke Museum Jabbeke | Mu.ZEE Ostend





*Moonlight*, 1913  
136.5 × 91 cm

Oil on canvas  
Permeke Museum Jabbeke | Mu.ZEE Ostend





*The Stranger*, 1916  
173 × 180 cm

Oil on canvas  
Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium (KMSKB), Brussels



*Fisherfolk*, 1919  
22 × 31.5 cm

Watercolour and ink on paper  
Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp (KMSKA) – Flemish Community





*Landscape in Devonshire, 1917*  
41.5 × 55 cm

Oil on wood fibre board  
Permeke Museum Jabbeke | Mu.ZEE Ostend



*Harvest in Devonshire*, 1917  
120.5 × 170 cm

Oil on canvas, mounted on panel  
Permeke Museum Jabbeke | Mu.ZEE Ostend





*Devonshire Beach*, 1917  
72 × 61.5 cm

Oil on canvas, mounted on panel  
Permeke Museum Jabbeke | Mu.ZEE Ostend



*Ostend Harbour*, 1919  
31 × 49.5 cm

Mixed media on paper  
Private collection



## CATALOGUE

### Concept and realisation

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